The Ritual Aspect of Prophecy

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Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht
2019

Nissinen , M H 2019 , The Ritual Aspect of Prophecy . in L-S Tiemeyer (ed.) , Prophecy and Its Cultic Dimensions . Journal of Ancient Judaism Supplements , vol. 31 , Vandenhoeck & þÿ R u p r e c h t , G ö t t i n g e n , p p . 1 0 1 1 1 4 .

http://hdl.handle.net/10138/330156

submittedVersion

The Ritual Aspect of Prophecy

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1. Prophets and Rituals in Ancient Eastern Mediterranean Sources

1.1. Prophetic Performances in Temples

Prophets and temples belong together. This is what ancient Eastern Mediterranean sources suggest, whether one reads them in Akkadian, in Hebrew, or in Greek. Prophetic divination often takes place in temples, prophets are time and again mentioned together with temple functionaries, and even appear as advocates of temples and their worship. The strong link between prophets and temples makes it probable that temple institutions provided the venue for prophetic performances and even employed prophets. Abundant evidence of this can be found in Mesopotamian letters and administrative texts as well as from Greek literary sources.[1] Even in the prophetic books of the Hebrew Bible, despite the so-called "cultic criticism" to be sporadically found in some of them, the temple of Jerusalem is a vitally important topic.

Both ancient Near Eastern and Greek texts give reason to assume that prophets, temples, and their worship were intertwined in different ways in the ancient Eastern Mediterranean world. This raises the question to what extent and in which way prophetic divination typically took place in a ritual setting, and whether prophets can be found as ritual performers.

A second question to be asked is whether prophecy, as another type of divination, could itself be considered a ritual. Divination is affiliated with ritual action in various ways depending on its method and purpose, and different types of divination function differently when it comes to the involvement of diviners in ritual

[1] For a detailed analysis, see Martti Nissinen, *Ancient Prophecy: Near Eastern, Biblical, and Greek Perspectives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

actions. Mesopotamian extispicy, for instance, was itself a ritual act for the purpose of *têrtam epēšum* ("to produce a directive")—that is, to obtain a verdict (*dīnu*) of the divine court presided by Šamaš and/or Adad as an answer to the binary question of the client.[2] The verdict of the gods was presented in the exta of the sacrificial animal, and the ritual procedure lasted from dusk to dawn, requiring a sequence of prayers and sacrifices, culminating in the slaughter of the animal and the interpretation of its entrails by the diviner (*bārû*).[3]

Even Greek sources describe two types of sacrificial divination, typically performed before the engagement in military campaigns.[4] The type of divination involving the act of extispicy was called *hiera* (τὰ ἱερά, "signs" or "omens"), which was performed in the campground by examining the sacrificial animal's liver. The other type, *sphagia* (τὰ σφάγια > σφάζειν, "to cut the throat"), involved cutting the

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[2] See Piotr Steinkeller, "Of Stars and Men: The Conceptual and Mythological Setup of Babylonian Extispicy," in Agustinus Gianto (ed.), *Biblical and Oriental Essays in Memory of William L. Moran* (BibOr 48; Rome: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 2005), 11–47.

[3] See Ulla Susanne Koch, *Mesopotamian Divination Texts: Conversing with Gods. Sources from the First Millennium BCE* (GMTR 7; Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2015), 46–47, 122–27; Stefan M. Maul, *Die Wahrsagekunst im Alten Orient: Zeichen des Himmels und der Erde* (Munich: Beck, 2013), 29–109; Ivan Starr, *The Rituals of the Diviner* (Bibliotheca Mesopotamica 12; Malibu, CA: Undena Publications, 1983).

[4] See Michael Attyah Flower, *The Seer in Ancient Greece* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2008), 159–65; Robert Parker, "Sacrifice and Battle," in Hans van Wees (ed.), *War and Violence in Ancient Greece* (Swansea: Classical Press of Wales, 2009), 299–314; Michael H. Jameson, "Sacrifice before Battle," in Victor D. Hanson (ed.), *Hoplites: The Classical Greek Battle Experience* (London: Routledge, 1991), 197–228.

throat of the victim and observing the flow of the blood. It was performed in the battle-line when the two opposing armies were on the point of engaging.

The act of extispicy can itself be called a ritual, but the same cannot be easily said of prophecy. From the sources one gets the general impression that the prophetic performance does not in principle presuppose any kind of a predetermined context; it is often unprovoked and not inherently bound to specific ritual procedures. This cannot be taken as an absolute rule, though. Prophetic performances certainly took place in ancient Near Eastern temples, sometimes even within a ritual framework, and in the Greek oracle sites, such as the temples of Apollo at Delphi, Didyma, and Claros the prophetic performance seems to have been thoroughly ritualized.

At Didyma, according to Iamblichus (*De Myst.* 3.11)[5] who is dependent on Porphyry, the female prophet of Apollo at Didyma prepared herself for the reception of the god by fasting and bathing in the sacred precinct. During the preparations and/or the oracular process itself, the female prophet held a staff, sat on an axle, and dipped her feet in the water of the sacred spring rising within the inner sanctum (*adyton*); the exact order of these elements in the oracular ritual is not clear. The contact with the water of the sacred spring, and especially inhaling its vapors, enabled the prophet, in Iamblichus' Neoplatonist terms, to "partake of the god," that is, to

[5] Emma C. Clarke, John M. Dillon, and Jackson P. Hershbell, *Iamblichus*: De Mysteriis. *Translated with Introduction and Notes* (SBLWGRW 4; Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), 148–51; cf. Joseph Fontenrose, *Didyma: Apollo's Oracle, Cult, and Companions* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988), 78–85; Antti Lampinen, "Θεῷ μεμελημένε Φοίβῳ: Oracular Functionaries at Claros and Didyma in the Imperial Period," in Mika Kajava (ed.), *Studies in Ancient Oracle and Divination* (AIRF 40; Rome: Institutum Romanum Finlandiae, 2013), 49–88 (84–87).

become possessed by Apollo and becoming his instrument.[6] The oracular session was participated by a person called *prophētēs* who was not an inspired speaker but the temple official who mediated the divine words uttered by the female prophet to the consultants. The whole Didymaean procedure from the preparations of the female prophet to writing down the oracles in the *khrēsmographeion* can be perceived of as a divinatory ritual.

The oracular process at the sanctuaries of Apollo at Delphi[7] and Claros[8] were not identical but well comparable to that at Didyma. At Delphi, both the enquirers and the female prophet, the Pythia, herself had to undergo ritual preparations before the actual inquiry could take place. After these preparations, the Pythia would enter the sanctuary and, sitting on a tripod, utter the words of Apollo to the enquirer.[9] It is

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[6] See Crystal Addey, *Divination and Theurgy in Neoplatonism: Oracles of the Gods* (Ashgate Studies in Philosophy and Theology in Late Antiquity; Farnham: Ashgate, 2014); eadem, "Divine Possession and Divination in the Graeco-Roman World: The Evidence from Iamblichus's *On the Mysteries*, in Bettina E. Schmidt and Lucy Huskinson (eds.), *Spirit Possession and Trance: New Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (Continuum Advances in Religious Studies; London: Continuum, 2010), 171–185.

[7] See Hugh Bowden, *Classical Athens and the Delphic Oracle: Divination and Democracy* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005), 17–38; cf., in comparison with the Near East, Herbert B. Huffmon, "The Oracular Process: Delphi and the Near East," *VT* 57 (2007): 449–460.

[8] See Jean-Charles Moretti Nicolas Bresch, Isabel Bonora, Didier Laroche, and Olivier Riss, "Le temple d'Apollon et le fonctionnement de l'oracle," in Jean-Charles Moretti (ed.), *Le sanctuaire de Claros et son oracle* (Travaux de la Maison del'Orient et de la Méditerranée 65; Lyon: Maison del'Orient et de la Méditerranée, 2014), 33–49; Lampinen, "Oracular Functionaries at Claros and Didyma," 80–84.

[9] This reconstruction is based on Euripides, *Ion* 93, 419; *Phoen.* 224; Plutarch, *Mor.* 3.397a; 3.435b.

possible that the words of the Pythia were mediated to the inquirer by a *prophētēs* who was not an inspired speaker but a cultic functionary presiding the session. At Claros, according to Iamblichus, the oracle functioned by means of water which the prophet drank to receive divine inspiration. The inscriptions from Claros always mention five funtionaries involving in the oracular process:[10] the administrator of the temple (*prytanis*); the priest (*hiereus*) who presided the session and performed sacrifices; the the (male) *prophētēs* who uttered the oracle; the singer (*thespiōdos*) who recited the oracle in verse, and the scribe (*grammateus*) who kept the written record.[11]

The knowledge of the ritual procedures in the Greek oracles sites is dependent on a rather uneven set of sources from different ages, hence the reconstruction may be more or less consistent with what actually took place dyring the oracular sessions. In

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[10] See Jean-Louis Ferrary, *Les Mémoriaux de délegations du sanctuaire oraculaire de Claros, d'après la documentation conservée dans le Fonds Louis Robert (Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres)*. Vols. 1–2. Mémoires de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres 49 (Paris: Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres, 2014).

[11] Thus Herbert W. Parke, *The Oracles of Apollo in Asia Minor* (London: Croom Helm, 1985), 220–221, and Lampinen, "Oracular Functionaries at Claros and Didyma," 60–64. Some scholars have doubted the ability of the *prophētēs*, who was selected annually, to be able to function as an inspired speaker and, therefore, reversed the roles of the *prophētēs* and the *thespiōdos*; thus, e.g., Jean-Louis Ferrary, "La distribution topographique des mémoriaux de délégations dans le sanctuaire de Claros," in Jean-Charles Moretti (ed.), *Le sanctuaire de Claros et son oracle: Actes du colloque international de Lyon, 13–14 janvier 2012* (Travaux de la Maison de l'Orient et de la Méditeerranée 65; Lyon: Maison de l'Orient et de la Méditeerranée, 2014), 189–200 (88).

all three cases it is beyond any doubt that the reception of the divine word was organized as the focal point of a ritual procedure.

The picture gets different in Mesopotamian sources, in which the connection between prophecy and ritual is much more difficult to figure out even though it clearly exists. There are no descriptions revealing whether prophetic performances followed any standard ritual procedures, but there is a fair amount of direct and indirect evidence of the presence of prophets in the temples. Administrative documents from different times and places mention prophets among the temple personnel.[12] Moreover, lexical lists routinely associate prophets with many kinds of temple personnel, suggesting a common socio-religious setting.[13] These texts indisputably document the institutional background of the prophets in sanctuaries without, however, revealing much of their ritual functions.

A prophetic oracle from Assyria presents itself as a response to the prayer of the queen mother Naqia on behalf of her son,[14] and royal inscriptions from Assyria tell how Kings Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal implored the gods, receiving prophetic

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[12] Ur III (21st cent. BCE): SBLWAW 12 119 (TCS 1 369); Old Babylonian (20th–17th cent. BCE): SBLWAW 12 67a (OECT 13 263: Ešnunna); 135c (CM 33 1: Larsa); 135h (IM 50.852: Sippar); Middle Assyrian (14th–10th cent. BCE): SBLWAW 12 123 (VS 19 1: Kar-Tukulti-Ninurta); Neo-Assyrian (10th–7th cent. BCE): SBLWAW 12 110 (SAA 12 69: Assur); 118c (ZTT 25: Tušḫan) Neo-Babylonian (7th–6th cent. BCE): SBLWAW 12 130 (OECT 1 20–21: Uruk).

[13] Old Babylonian: SBLWAW 12 120 (*MSL* 12 5.22); Middle Assyrian: SBLWAW 135l (Erimhuš III); Neo-Assyrian: SBLWAW 124 (MSL 12 4.121); 125 (*MSL* 12 4.222); 126 (*MSL* 12 6.2); 135m (LTBA 2 1); Neo-Babylonian: SBLWAW 12 135n (OIP 114 122); Late Babylonian (5th–2nd cent. BCE): SBLWAW 12 135q (SpTU 3 116).

[14] SBLWAW 12 75 (SAA 9 1.8).

responses to their prayers.[15] Likewise, the Aramaic inscription of Zakkur, the king of Hamath, reports how this king received an oracle of Baalshamayn "through seers and through visionaries."[16] It is evident that all these royal prayers are expected to have taken place in a ritual setting

Many letters from Mari and Assyria tell how prophets deliver divine messages in temples.[17] These messages can be imagined to have happened within a ritual framework, as is the case in the letter of Mar-Issar reporting a prophetic performance that took place on occasion of the substitute king ritual in Akkad in 671 BCE:[18]

> [I] have heard that before these rituals, a female prophet has prophesied, saying to Damqî, the son of the chief administrator: "You will take over the kingship!" [Moreover], the female prophet had spoken to him in the assembly of the country: "I have revealed the thieving polecat of my lord and placed it in your hands."

The text refers to the apotropaic Namburbi rituals performed on behalf of Esarhaddon while Damqî, the substitute king, gave his life for his redemption and was buried together with his wife. The prophecies had been uttered to Damqî while he was still

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[15] Esarhaddon: SBLWAW 12 97 (Nin. A), lines i 59–62; Assurbanipal: SBLWAW 12 101 (RINAP 5 3), lines v 25–76.

[16] SBLWAW 12 137 (*KAI* 202), lines A 10ff. (line A 12: [*b*]*yd ḥzyn wbyd ʻddn*).

[17] E.g. SBLWAW 12 6 (ARM 26 196), lines 8–10: "Write to me whatever oracle is delivered in the temple of God and which you hear!" Cf., e.g., SBLWAW 12 5 (ARM 26 195); 23 (ARM 26 213); 24 (ARM 26 214); 25 (ARM 26 215); 29 (ARM 26 219); 42 (ARM 26 237); 111 (SAA 13 37); 113 (SAA 13 144).

[18] SBLWAW 12 109 (SAA 10 352), lines 22–r. 4.

alive, and they clearly emulated royal oracles pronounced to the actual king.[19] The female prophet had appeared in different phases of the substitute king ritual, but the letter does not give more specific details of the ritual context of each of the two oracles.

1.2. Prophets as Ritual Performers

Inspired divination at the major Greek oracle sites, Delphi, Didyma, and Claros, was clearly organized as a ritual procedure in which the performance of the prophet (that is, the inspired speaker[20]) was the focal point of the divinatory ritual. Considering the strong link between prophets and temples even in the Near Eastern sources, one would expect the prophets to feature often in descriptions of rituals. Such texts, unfortunately, are very few—indeed, barely enough to demonstrate that prophets indeed had a role to play in some Mesopotamian rituals.

Two texts from the eighteenth century BCE Mari pertaining to the ritual of Ištar, include sections in which prophets are mentioned.[21] One of the texts mentions a male

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[19] For similar sayings, cf. SBLWAW 12 74 (SAA 9 1.7); 75 (SAA 9 1.8); 89 (SAA 9 4).

[20] Note that the male word *prophētēs* does not denote the inspired speaker (except, perhaps, for Claros), whereas the female *prophētis* does refer to the Pythia of Delphi and the female prophet at Didyma.

[21] SBLWAW 12 51 and 52 (FM 3 2 and 3 3); see Jean-Marie Durand and Michaël Guichard, "Les rituels de Mari," in Dominique Charpin and Jean-Marie Durand (eds.) *Florilegium Marianum 3: Recueil d'études à la mémoire de Marie-Thèrése Barrelet* (Mémoires de NABU 4; Paris: SEPOA, 1997), 19–78 (72–75); Ziegler, Nele, *Florilegium marianum 9: Les musiciens et la musique d'après les archives de Mari*. (Mémoires de NABU 10. Paris: SEPOA, 2007), 55–64.

prophet (*muḫḫûm*) and the other a group of female prophets (*muḫḫātum*) performing during the ritual in interplay with musicians (*kalûm* or *nārum*/*mārē nāri*):

> The *gerseqqû*-courtiers stand on his [scil. the king's] right and left side. The chanters st[r]ik[e] up the "ú-ru am-ma-da-ru-bi" of the [e]nd of the month. If by the end of the mo[nth] the prophet maintains his equili[brium] and is not a[ble] t[o] prophes[y] when it is time for [the chant] "mà-e-ú-re-m[én]," the temple officials let the m[usicians] go. If he pr[ophecies, they strike up] "mà-e-ú-re-m[én]."[22]

> […] the prophe[t …] who arises […] When the musicians have entered before her [scil. Ištar], the female prophets […] and the musi[cians]. I[f the female prophets] main[tain their equilibrium], two [musicians … enter] the […. They sing] and *eršemmakkum* before [the goddess for *Enlil*].[23]

Broken as both texts are, they do not enable the exact description of the ritual procedure, but in both of them, the performance of the musicians is somehow dependent on the prophets' ability to reach the altered state of consciousness. Evidently, the divine inspiration could not be taken for granted, but neither was the successful performance of the ritual dependent on the prophetic element. The first tablet has a practical instruction written on the edge, which gives the whole procedure a touch of reality: "Water in a container and four *meḫsû*-jars are installed; they are always at the disposal of the prophets."[24] One can only speculate whether these jars contained something that was used, not just for refreshment, but to enhance the prophetic ecstasy.

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[22] SBLWAW 12 51 (FM 3 2), lines ii 17–27.

[23] SBLWAW 12 52 (FM 3 3), lines iii 2–13.

[24] SBLWAW 12 51 (FM 3 2), lines s. ii 1–3.

The repertoire of the musicians surrounding the performance of the prophet consists of laments known from other Old Babylonian rituals of Ištar.[25] This connects the ritual performed at Mari with the tradition of Ištar rituals involving ecstatic performances, the purpose of which was probably to impersonate the goddess, to symbolize her constrasting aspects, and, in the case of laments, to emulate her agony.[26] The altered state of consciousness of a *muḫḫûm* typically results in acting as the mouthpiece of a deity, which even here should be the most probable function of the prophet's ecstasy, even though this is not explicitly stated.[27]

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[25] See Brigitte Groneberg, *Lob der Ištar: Gebet und Ritual an die altbabylonische Venusgöttin* (CM 8; Groningen: Styx, 1997), 137–150. For ú-ru am-ma-da-ru-bi, which is probably identical to úru àm-ma-ir-ra-bi, is a canonical lament to Ištar; see Konrad Volk, *Die Balaĝ-Komposition úru àm-ma-ir-ra-bi: Rekonstruktion und Bearbeitung der Tafeln 18 (19'ff.), 19, 20 und 21 der späten, kanonischen Version* (FAOS 18; Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 1989); Brigitte Groneberg, "Ein Ritual an Ištar," *MARI* 8 (1997): 291–303 (293–295); eadem, *Lob der Ištar*, 148–150. The other lament mà-e-ú-re-mén, probably equals the canonical lament me-e ur-re-mèn (see Durand and Guichard, "Les rituels de Mari," 54.

[26] Cf. Simo Parpola, *Assyrian Prophecies* (SAA 9; Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 1997), xxxiv who finds the purpose of ecstasy and wailing in "the purification of the soul so that it would regain its original unity with God," and Groneberg, *Lob der Ištar*, 152–154, who compares the ecstasy and transgression of gender typical of the rituals of Ištar with shamanism.

[27] Jonathan Stökl, *Prophecy in the Ancient Near East: A Philological and Sociological Comparison* (CHANE 56; Leiden: Brill, 2012), 65–66, 211–214, prefers to translate the verb *maḫû* here as "raving" rather than "prophesying": "I argue that the *muḫḫû*'s role is as a cult ecstatic here. The question is whether he goes into ecstasy, whether he raves, not whether he prophesies or not" (p. 214). However, the

Neo-Assyrian evidence of the participation of prophets in rituals comes from the collection of prophecies pertaining to Esarhaddon's coronation (SAA 9 3). The tablet is an edited collection comprising five sections divided by rulings and a concluding colophon. The text organizes prophetic oracles between ritual procedures as elements of the coronation ceremonies.[28] The five prophecies are embedded in different phases of the ceremony that takes place in Ešarra, the temple of Aššur in the city of Assur. The first of them, pronouncing peace and well-being for Esarhaddon, Assyria, the heaven, and the earth seems to belong to the ritual procession leading to Ešarra before the actual ceremony. The second prophecy is an oracle of salvation (*šulmu*) of Aššur to the Assyrians proclaiming the victory and global rule of Esarhaddon at the courtyard of Ešarra; the oracle is placed before the courtyard gods,

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ecstasy probably had a specific purpose and did not happen only for the sake of raving.

[28] For the structure, content, and historical setting of the tablet, see Parpola, *Assyrian Prophecies*, l, lviii-lix, lxx, 22–27; Eckart Otto, "Die Ursprünge der Bundestheologie im Alten Testament und im Alten Orient," *ZAR* 4 (1998): 1–84 (58–59); Beate Pongratz-Leisten, *Herrschaftswissen in Mesopotamien: Formen der Kommunikation zwischen Gott und König im 2. und 1. Jahrtausend v.Chr* (SAAS 10; Helsinki: Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 1999), 77–80; Nissinen, "Spoken, Written, Quoted and Invented: Orality and Writtenness in Ancient Near Eastern Prophecy," in Ehud Ben Zvi and Michael H. Floyd (eds.), *Writings and Speech in Israelite and Ancient Near Eastern Prophecy* (SBLSymS 10; Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000), 235–271 (251–253); Matthijs J. de Jong, *Isaiah among the Ancient Near Eastern Prophets: A Comparative Study of the Earliest Stages of the Isaiah Tradition and the Neo-Assyrian Prophecies* (VTSup 117; Leiden: Brill, 2007), 408–412; Stökl, *Prophecy in the Ancient Near East*, 138–140; Manfred Weippert, *Götterwort in Menschenmund: Studien zur Prophetie in Assyrien, Israel und Juda* (FRLANT 252; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014), 121–123.

which presents it as already having a written form. The third oracle is another *šulmu* of Aššur referring to the events leading to Esarhaddon's victory over his brothers in the civil war. This oracle is followed by two cultic instructions: the placing of the *šulmu* before the statue of Aššur in the temple, and reading out a different text, the "tablet of the covenant" (*ṭuppi adê*), before Esarhaddon.[29] The setting of the fourth prophecy, separated from the previous by a double ruling, is the meal of covenant on the temple terrace hosted by Ištar and served to the vassal kings and representatives of Assyrian citizens, involving a specific drink, *mê ṣarṣāri*. The fifth oracle is spoken by the goddess who demands proper treatment, food and drink from Esarhaddon; no further cultic instructions are given in this final section of the tablet.

The enthronement ceremony of Esarhaddon serves as a prime example of the use of prophetic divination in a most prestigious ritual setting. The tablet SAA 9 3 can be understood as a post-event summary of the prophecies pronounced on this occasion. As such, it is most probably an edited, literary compilation of oracles pronounced on-site during different phases of the ceremony.[30] Placing the *šulmu* before the gods gives the impression that the oracles have already been written down on a tablet. If this is the case, the prophecies were not spontaneous outbursts but, rather, belonged to the script of the ritual.

Yet another ritual text, dating from the Neo-Babylonian period more than a millennium after the texts from Mari, also mentions a prophet (LÚ.GUB.BA/*maḫḫû*) together with musicians performing in the ritual of the Lady of Uruk at the Eanna temple:

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[29] Pongratz-Leisten, *Herrschaftswissen*, 78: "Der Zusammenschluß sowohl des Heilsorakels wie auch der Ritualanweisung läßt vermuten, daß das Heilsorakel zum Zeitpunkt der *adê*-Vereidigung geschah"; ibid., 80: "Der Schreiber schildert erst das Heilsorakel, das kurz vor der *adê*-Zeremonie erging, und dann erst diese selbst."

[30] Cf. de Jong, *Isaiah*, 411.

> In the month of Adar, on the first, second, sixth, […], fourteenth and fifteenth day: duties of the ch[anter and the musician]; the *edūtu* is (ful)filled.
> On the second day, on offering […] kettledrum is played […] the purify.
> On the third day, the Lady of Uruk proceeds and takes a seat between the curtains […] The prophet goes around it three times, carries the water basin and proceeds […]
> [On the fourth day], the prophet goes around it three times, carries the water basin and proce[eds …] the copper [kettledrum] is played, sacrificial me[als] are offered, the offering […] kettledrum is played and danc[e …] the censer. The musician takes a seat and shou[ts …][31]

The ritual functioning of the prophet is quite remarkable. He goes around something, probably the statue of the goddess situated in a cubicular space surrounded by curtains (*birīt šiddī*). The prophet carries a water-basin used for the ritual washing of hands, elsewhere accompanied with a linen towel.[32] While the prophet is circumambulating the goddess, perhaps for purification, copper kettledrum is played and sacrificial meals are offered. The text says nothing of the prophet's actual prophesying, neither does it refer to his ecstatic comportment. The verb *ragāmu* is not used of the prophet's performance but of the ritual shouting of the musician (LÚ.NAR/*nāru*).

The prophet appears in this Neo-Babylonian text as another cultic functionary in a ritual not primarily focused on divination. The larger ritual framework of *LKU* 51 does not suggest any divinatory elements embedded in the rituals consisting primarily

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[31] SBLWAW 12 135o (*LKU* 51); see Paul-Alain Beaulieu, *The Pantheon of Uruk during the Neo-Babylonian Period* (CM 23; Leiden: Brill, 2003), 375.

[32] Beaulieu, *Pantheon of Uruk*, 140. For ritual circumambulations in cuneiform texts, see Amalia Catagnoti, "Ritual Circumambulations in the Syro-Mesopotamian Cuneiform Texts," in Nicola Laneri (ed.), *Defining the Sacred: Approaches to the Archaeology of Religion in the Near East* (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2015), 134–141.

of sacrifices and music, which raises the question of whether this reflects a change in the function of the prophets from diviners to cultic functionaries. If this was the case, however, one should also ask what, then, might have been the specific task of the *maḫḫû* that could not be performed by another cultic functionary. There is, unfortunately, too little evidence of the function and position of prophets in the Neo-Babylonian period to answer these questions with any degree of certainty. A word-list from Nippur mentions the word *maḫḫû* together with exorcists, diviners, musicians, and men-women (*kulu'u, sinnišānu*), following the lexical tradition deriving from Old Babylonian times.[33] A Neo-Babylonian list of temple offerings distributes parts of the sacrificial animals among the temple personnel: the high priest, the prophet, the *kurgarrû* (man-woman), and the butcher, which demonstrates that the Babylonian temples actually accommodated prophets.[34] No prophetic oracles or references to their delivery have been preserved from the Neo-Babylonian period.

The different interfaces of ritual and divination seem to be partly, but not entirely due to the method of divination. Extispicy, requiring the slaughter of a sacrificial animal, is by necessity intertwined with (other) ritual acts. Even prophecy could be organized as a ritual procedure, as was the case in the major Greek oracle sites. In the Near Eastern sources, however, prophetic performances are not presented as rituals in their own right; if prophets perform in ritual contexts, their performance is subordinate to the main purpose of the ritual in which the prophets participate among other cultic functionaries. The prophetic performance may be of divinatory nature as in the case of the enthronement ceremony of Esarhaddon and, probably, of the Ištar ritual of

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[33] SBLWAW 12 135n (OIP 114 122); see Steven W. Cole, *Nippur IV: The Early Neo-Babylonian Governor's Archive from Nippur* (OIP 114; Chicago: The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 1996), 254–255.

[34] SBLWAW 12 130 (OECT 1 20–21).

Mari, but they may also appear as cultic functionaries without a specifically divinatory role, which is the case in the Neo-Babylonian ritual of the Lady of Uruk.

2. Is Prophetic Performance a Ritual? From Text to Theory

However fragmentary the evidence of the prophets' ritual functions and prophetic performances in sanctuaries is, it demonstrates on the one hand that prophets indeed were involved in rituals, and on the other hand that rituals were not the exclusive venues of intermediation of divine words by the prophets. However, considering the nature of a prophetic performance as an act of divine-human communication, it is worth asking if such an act could itself be regarded as a ritual, even without a temple context.[35]

Divination, including prophetic divination, can be understood as a cognitive process that links human action both with its allegedly divine preconditions and its presumed effects. The effects, however, are not the direct result of divinatory acts (as they are in magical acts), because divination functions as a method of acquiring and transmitting superhuman knowledge to humans, whose actions are then supposed to follow the divine will.

The purpose of divination can certainly be characterized as *Zukunfts-bewältigung*,[36] but this does not mean that divination is all about prognostication. However, implementing Jesper Sørensen's model of human action (Fig. 1) comprising the conditional space, the action space, and the effect space, we can see that the acquisition and transfer of superhuman knowledge belongs essentially to the

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[35] Cf. my analysis in Martti Nissinen, "Ritual in Ancient Eastern Mediterranean Divination," in Risto Uro, Juliette Day, Richard E. DeMaris, and Rikard Roitto (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Ritual* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), forthcoming.

[36] Cf. Maul, *Wahrsagekunst*, 315–232.

diagnosis which connects the symbolic, superhuman conditional space with the human action space. The *prognosis*, again, links the action with the effects, and is therefore the second step linking the action space with the effect space. The prognosis no longer belongs to the realm of the diviner but rather to that of the addressee who decides what consequences should be drawn from the acquired divine knowledge.

Fig. 1: Representations of ordinary actions[37]

With regard to ritual action this means that the divinatory ritual is not designed to bring about change, and, unlike the magical ritual, does not have an immediate efficacy: "what divination reveals, magic can resolve."[38] What is ritualized is the act

[37] See Jesper Sørensen, *A Cognitive Theory of Magic* (Cognitive Science of Religion Series; Lanham, MD: Altamira, 2007), 141–153.

[38] Ann K. Guinan, "A Severed Head Laughed: Stories of Divinatory Interpretation," in Leda Ciraolo and Jonathan Seidel (eds.), *Magic and Divination in the Ancient World* (AMD 2; Leiden: Brill / Groningen: Styx, 2002), 7–40 (18).

of divine-human communication happening in the conditional space. Apparently, however, divine-human communication was not restricted to ritual actions. Divination itself and the ritual actions accompanying it belong to the same event frame but are not identical.[39] Prophecy (at least in the Near East) could take place independently of rituals performed in sanctuaries—unless the prophetic performance as such is not defined as a ritual.

That prophets appear in ritual contexts means that the prophetic performance sometimes was set in a ritual context, but it does not follow from this that prophecy as such should be understood as a ritual. The interface between ritual and prophetic performance may be best understood from the point of view of agency. Again, I rely on Jesper Sørensen's division in agent-based, action-based, and object-based agencies.[40] Agent-based agency is at stake when the performer functions as the facilitator of the communication between the sacred and the profane space. This is clearly what happens in prophetic performances, not action-based agency in which the connection between the sacred and profane spaces is dependent in the correct performance of a ritual sequence. Still further from prophetic performance is the object-based agency, which requires certain objects to be used in the ritual. While such objects are essentially important in many forms of technical divination, prophetic divination seldom makes use of any objects, and even if it does, no specific efficacy is ascribed to such objects.

The strong emphasis on agent-based agency reduces the significance of fixed ritual actions in prophetic divination, making the prophetic performances independent of objects and ritual paraphernalia. The role of the prophet is that of an identity

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[39] See Ulla Susanne Koch, "Three Strikes and You're Out: A View on Cognitive Theory and the First-Millennium Extispicy Ritual," in Amar Annus (ed.), *Divination and Interpretation of Signs in the Ancient World* (Oriental Institute Seminars 6; Chicago, IL: The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 2010), 43–57 (45).

[40] Sørensen, *Cognitive Theory of Magic*, 65–74.

connector.[41] In fact, the human agent is believed to be taken over by the superhuman agent who is perceived of as the actual agent of the prophet performance. This emphasizes the agent even more: if the superhuman source of knowledge *is* the actual agent of the action, the significance of ritual actions and objects is reduced to a minimum. This, in my view, is the main reason why prophecy (at least in the Near Eastern sources) differs from other methods of divination with regard to ritual practices.

Is the prophetic performance, then, itself a ritual? Prophecy, like ritual, is social action and symbolic communication; like ritual, prophecy has an agent (the prophet) and a patient (the addressee), even a kind of instrument, if the verbal message can be understood as such. Prophecy has certain affinities with what Robert McCauley and Thomas Lawson call a "special agent ritual."[42] The prophetic performance is not repeatable because the transmission of the divine word is bound to time, place, and specific addressees. The sources make abundantly clear that it does not follow a set ritual procedure. The connection between the superhuman agent and the audience happens exclusively through the special agent, the prophet, who is believed to be capable of acting as the mouthpiece of the god and, thus the idenitity connector.

However, prophecy does not share all the features of the special agent ritual. Prophetic oracles are not only performed for one single patient at a time but can be pronouced to a wider audience, even to a group of people that is not present.

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[41] For the ritual agent as identity connector, see Sørensen, *Cognitive Theory of Magic*, 66–67.

[42] Robert N. McCauley and E. Thomas Lawson, *Bringing Ritual to Mind: Psychological Foundations of Cultural Forms* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 120–22; cf. the critical review by Risto Uro, *Ritual and Christian Beginnings: A Socio-Cognitive Analysis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 33–34, 85–87.

Moreover, from the point of view of ritual efficacy, the effects of the prophetic performance are indirect at the best— the question of the prophecy "coming true" is notoriously difficult and ultimately a matter of societal interpretation. If it is essential that ritual participants always *do* something to something or somebody, then prophetic performance can be considered a ritual only if the effects of the "doing" may be dependent on the patient's own action and interpretation.

The theories developed by cognitive scientists of religion have recently been successfully implemented in the study of magic,[43] less so with regard to divination.[44] I hope to have been able to show in this essay the usefulness of the cognitive tool in the study of the ritual aspect of prophecy.

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[43] E.g., Sørensen, *Cognitive Theory of Magic*; Uro, *Ritual and Christian Beginnings*; Czachesz, "Magic and Mind"; and the articles included in István Czachesz and Risto Uro (eds.), *Mind, Morality, and Magic: Cognitive Science Approaches in Biblical Studies* (Durham: Acumen, 2013).

[44] See, however, Koch, "Three Strikes and You're Out!"

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